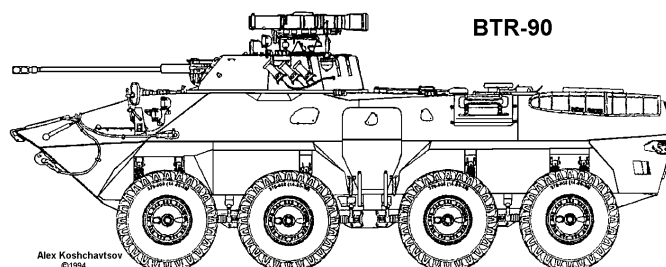


In the Eyes of This Analyst

by Sergeant First Class Willis A. Bullard



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During the past decade, the intelligence community has been inundated with rumors of a dissolving worldwide threat. With the fall of communism in Eastern Europe came a resounding sigh of relief from many analysts who, just the week before, were trying to keep up with the limitations and performance characteristics of Soviet-made equipment. The uncertainty of the fall of communism led to a lack of focus for intelligence collection. Our mission in Europe has been drastically altered, while other units continue to determine which direction their intelligence should lead them. Well, the tragedy is to ignore intelligence.

A viable threat still exists throughout the world. No, we cannot pinpoint this threat in terms of which army is invading which country, or whom our nation will fight next, but we can point a strong finger at the continuous production and improvements of combat weapon systems. Countries that were once enemies are drawn together in the arms market, making business deals for weapons purchases. Turkey has recently ventured into the market, buying both Soviet and Brazilian equipment. In ten years, what kind of equipment will we and our allies see emerging from our potential foes' arsenals and armories? Countries with little to no financial stability have found themselves tempted by reasonably-priced equipment now on sale by the Former Soviet Union (FSU). Not to be outdone, countries not so eager to make a buck," but to retain market share, have matched the prices of the FSU manufacturers in order to remain competitive in the world arms trade.

In the last five years, we have seen the introduction of many Russian-built weapon systems into the arms market. From the SA-15 TOR, a sophisticated surface-to-air missile system, to the newest armored fighting vehicle, the BTR-80A. Yes, the BTR-80 armored personnel carrier now has a variant described as a fighting vehicle.

At first glimpse, I thought that someone had modified a BRDM. From the front you see a low-profiled wheeled vehicle not too unlike the BRDM. After a closer look you can see the distinctive body style of the BTR-series vehicle: a pointed nose with splash plate on top, rather than folded underneath like the BTR-60, two windows with hatches that open upwards for the commander and driver, with a searchlight just above the commander's window (great target identifier), a full-sized door located between the second and third axle with a swing-out step for easier entry and exit than in the earlier BTR-series vehicles, and, finally, the familiar exhaust system on the rear that lies parallel to the ground (an identifying feature that separated the BTR-80 from earlier versions of the vehicle). But then you see some small, almost unnoticeable differences. On the right side the vehicle, just below the exhaust system, is an unidentified box. Just to the right of the commander's window is a cylindrical object that I believe to be a ventilator, similar to that found on the turret of the original BTR-80.

And then the greatest difference — the lack of the traditional BTR turret. The BTR-80A has a new one-man turret with an

externally-mounted 30-mm automatic cannon which is presumed to be the 2A42, the same gun found on the BMP-2, and a 7.62-mm PKT machine gun. The turret is capable of traversing 360 degrees and can be used against both ground and air targets. Basic load for the 30-mm cannon is 300 rounds, and the gun should have a maximum effective range of 1000 meters against ground targets, although it can be sighted out to 4000 meters. There are two automatic rates of fire for the 2A42 gun, low at 200 to 300 rounds per minute and high at 500 rounds. The 7.62-mm machine gun has 2000 rounds available. The introduction of a 30-mm cannon to this familiar armored personnel carrier does not, in my opinion, make it a fighting vehicle. It does, however, nullify one of the BTR-80's shortcomings as a survivable system on today's battlefield. It provides additional protection and fire-power support for personnel getting in and out of the vehicle. Standard equipment includes a central tire pressure system that allows tire pressure adjustments from inside the vehicle, night vision equipment, and firing/vision ports for its eight passengers. The BTR-80A is fully amphibious and propelled by a single waterjet at the rear. It maintains a water speed of 10km/h like its BTR relatives. Power is supplied by either a KAMAZ-7403 diesel with 260 horsepower or a YaMZ-M2 diesel with 240 horsepower, both capable of achieving a maximum speed of 90km/h.

This system, revealed last year, is in service with the Russian Army and is available for export. Many countries lacking formidable infantry fighting vehicles (IFV) can feasibly use this system as their battlefield mainstay. The BTR-80A's amphibious ability can also be a boost to the inventory of nations planning for or expecting maneuvers in marshy areas. This system, like most wheeled systems, unfortunately does not have the mobility of a tracked vehicle. Cross-country movement is more difficult and slow, compared to tracked counterparts such as the BMP-series IFV.

An important question to consider is whether earlier versions of the BTR-80 and the other BTR-series vehicles will be retrofitted with this armament. Is the BTR-80A going to replace or complement the Russian Army's current BTR fleet? There is now worldwide interest in the vehicle. The BTR-80A has recently been exhibited and demonstrated in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Turkey (which acquired the earlier BTR-80 from Germany and Russia). But this is not the end of the BTR line. Just last year the Russians unveiled the BTR-90, which combines the BTR-80 body with the turret of the BMP-2, including the AT-5 antitank missile system. In the eyes of this analyst, the Cold War may be over, but I believe it was just a precursor to the opening of a warehouse of trouble.

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